

JOINING GHOSTS OF TIME PAST

Before supermarkets, Fern Prairie Store was a rural hallmark

By DEAN BAKER
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FERN PRAIRIE — Closed for 38 years, the sagging two-story country store here still remains a landmark, a gray hulk with blistered paint and leaking roof in these rambling rural highlands north of Camas.

It's been decades since customers tracked into the store for a week's groceries after finishing the milking in the 1920s, or to buy eggs and milk on the way home from the mill in the 1940s or at least saunter in for cigarettes or soda pop while on a country ramble in the 1960s.

Today's customers patronize the supermarkets and convenience stores just a few miles away in Ca-

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Madlyn Slothower owns and lives at the site of the original Fern Prairie Store. She wants part of the store to be preserved as part of Clark County history.

Fern Prairie:

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mas or the suburbs of east Vancouver.

The store's last owner, Madlyn Slothower, 81, still lives in her house attached to the musty, 87-year-old store.

She sits on her bed among cardboard boxes filled with artifacts and ponders the old store's dim future.

"I'm packing away a lot of stuff that I don't use, and I want to get it into storage," she said, opening the store's door and stepping in, next to an antique coffee grinder. "I don't want any rats or mice or coons or possums getting into it."

Maybe a few have already. It's clear this one-time logging and farming community is about to lose this crumbling old building.

Gone are the retail goods that once stocked the store. Dozens of cardboard boxes now fill the old store, but mostly they are filled with items of little value.

The store sits five miles north of Camas at the intersection of state Highway 500 and Northeast 252nd Avenue, where on May 13, 1878, a post office was built. The post office operated for 16 years. Camas was founded in 1883, and its post office began to handle Fern Prairie mail in 1884, making the post office here obsolete.

It isn't clear what happened on the site for the next couple of decades.

But this store was built and opened in 1916 and operated until Slothower and her husband, Robert, closed it in 1965 due to overwhelming competition. Robert died in 1991.

Likely now, the old obsolete store will go where the ferns went that once covered the prairies here. Slowly, the ferns of Fern Prairie gave way to prune orchards and dairies which gave way to country homes as hay, corn and potato fields were bulldozed.

Now, Fern Prairie is a rural suburb. Cows still graze at Livingston Mountain Dairy nearby, and many homes are on rambling lots. Not far away are big high tech businesses. In this era of paved roads, SUVs and convenience stores, a country store here is apparently no longer a paying proposition.

New life?

Slothower, who bought the store with her husband in



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The original Fern Prairie Store, which was once the site of the original post office of Camas in the 1880s. Madlyn Slothower and her husband purchased the store in 1960 and closed it in 1965.

1960, would like it to be reborn as an artist's studio or community meeting space. But no one has stepped up to save the old gray edifice, its floor sloping and creaking, its few remaining antique goods crumbling and spilling from boxes.

There are a few antiques. She'd like to sell the old coffee grinder, the ancient meat and cheese blocks, the vegetable case. And she'd like to clean the place out and get rid of the boxes of old possessions that fill its interior.

"It's just one thing and another," she said. "We just stashed things after we closed the store."

This clean-up is an overwhelming task for an aging lady who is short of breath, even though she's still active, working hard on Fridays helping to put on the senior's breakfast in Washougal — all you can eat costs \$3.

And she spends a good deal of time now in her living room, where the light is tinged with blue reflecting her hundreds of cobalt blue bottles of all shapes and sizes. The collection covers shelves and window sills and is worth \$15,000, she said.

Collecting the glass is a hobby that she's maintained ever since she grew up nearby while her dad, Gus Smith, worked in the Camas paper mill.

She left home and took jobs

modeling eye makeup, finger-nail products and shoes in Riverside, Calif., before marrying her husband, a soldier, and moving with him around the country.

Her husband served in both Europe and Asia in World War II. After he left the service, they moved back to Clark County where they both worked in the mill and made a living doing odd jobs before buying the store.

The fact is, neighbors said, the old store holds a lot of community history.

"The owner used to give my brother leftover bananas. The store was right across from the school," recalled amateur historian Della Howe, 74, who has written a 286-page history of Fern Prairie that she hopes to publish. Her father, A.L. (Alma) Webberley operated a sawmill at Fern Prairie.

It was store owner Harry Tervooren who handed out bananas in the late 1940s and early 1950s, said Howe, who has tracked the ownership records for the store through the files of the Camas Post-Record newspaper.

Slothower and her husband bought the store from a family named Colson, who had bought it in 1953 from Tervooren, who had bought it from the Whiting family in 1944.

According to Howe's findings, the Whiting family bought it in 1941 from H.E. (Harold) Cooper, who had

owned it from about 1920, having bought it from original owners Sidney and Walter Blair. The Blairs apparently were related to Pinckney Blair, the first postmaster who had built the post office in 1878.

"I've found this was the site of a post office for at least 14 years before the Camas post office was built," said neighbor Connie Hobbs. "The store has also been the center of the community and the favorite of the children from the late 1800s to 1965."

Slothower's neighbor, Ellen Eastin, said she was well aware of what an important landmark the store is as she raked Slothower's grass and trash and got ready to pack bark dust around her trees.

Why was she working so hard on her neighbor's yard? "Because I love her," said Eastin, who has run a hair salon next door to Slothower for 11 years. "She's a lovely lady."

As for fixing up the store, Slothower said, she'll have to give that task to someone else.

"I can't do it. My husband, he couldn't do it either."

So she hopes someone will. It's a simple hope. But there's no sign the store will be saved.

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